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André Nusselder

Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2009.

ix + 170 pages

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Interface Fantasy has two interrelated aims: firstly, to ‘update’ the ‘Lacanian subject’ in the age of information, and conversely to explore how psychoanalytical concepts of fantasy can provide a means for thinking about digital technology. This two-way approach proves creative of new insights, although it can also tend to obscure the deliberately nebulous Lacan beneath a ‘Lacanian’ perspective made virtually concrete. André Nusselder draws on recent scholars who have productively explored the relation of psychoanalytical theories to new technologies and media, including Sherry Turkle and Žižek, the series editor, as well as drawing more generally on a wide range of recent works that analyse human computer interactions and the effects of digital technologies. The book also relates these more recent works to a broad historical sweep of philosophical theories on technology, capably bringing to the discussion relevant notions from the works of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Heidegger and Kant.

The central thesis is that ‘the computer screen functions in cyberspace as a psychological space—the screen of fantasy’ (5). Fantasy (*fantasme*) as equivalent to, or as taking the place of, the imaginary (*imaginaire*) in Lacan’s later works is justifiably posited (18, 70), though Lacan himself tends to resist such conflationary moves and instead to be teasingly hazy about relations between even closely related terms: ‘A strange thing, no doubt, which you will allow me not to go into. I mean what this term phantasy suggests in terms of a relation to phantasia, to the imagination.’ (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 14*, 3). Lacan’s notion that human misrecognition of a specular image as itself produces the fictional direction of the ego, Nusselder suggests can be updated to account for the lure presented by virtual identities accessible via digital technologies, for example, through an email presence or an avatar (5–6). Lacan, following Freud, describes the characteristically human circling around an inassimilable aim as itself the achieving of a goal, with displacement acting both as a motivating and a protective function. This, Nusselder argues, demonstrates that it is not current forms of technology, but being human in itself, that causes alienation (13). Both the lure and the alienation that technology can produce already drive our interactions in the world.

Nusselder begins by exploring classical utopian notions of technology as corrective of human defects through eliminating immersion in the body and natural environment, before going on to sketch out more fully the existing field from which his Lacanian account emerges. He draws on Doel and Clarke’s four concepts of virtual reality as: *simulation*, a dangerous and pale imitation; *suppletion*, a correcting of defects; *s(ed)uction*, a fetishized ideal; and as *simulacrum*, through Deleuzian actualisation or ‘becoming-other’ (rather than the realisation of pre-existing possibilities) (37). Following Levy’s emphasis on virtualization and humanisation as parallel processes, Nusselder then goes on to suggest how language, technology and law virtualize. Language virtualizes events, objects and time and space; technology virtualizes because it actualises the original object or action in new forms; while law is a virtualisation of relations of force and violence. The stress here is on the ways in which—as in Lacan’s notion of the

Symbolic—language, technology, and the law structure rather than merely reflect the real (42). Nusselder claims that cyberspace can be understood as ‘an extension of our age-old capacity and need to dwell in fiction’, since from a Lacanian perspective ‘we are always already in a fictitious perspective toward the real’ (53). Nusselder, following Bergoff, sees this as validating of discourses other than those of exactitude, such as artistic ones, since while ‘we inevitably live in metaphors’, whether we are in reality or the virtual world, ‘we must avoid the seduction of taking them literally’ (43). Lacan’s notion of fantasy, he argues, also suggests the means by which we can avoid this seduction, through its capacity not only to motivate, but also to alienate the subject barred from achieving union with the desired (85).

Later in the book Nusselder again returns to the notion of cyberspace as achieving Platonic and Cartesian ideals, by purportedly liberating humans from the physical realm and producing an objective representation of the real. Nusselder questions the sharpness of the distinction between physical and virtual space. He argues that in addition to Manovich’s concept of two traditions, one of simulation (e.g., sculpture) and the other of representation (e.g., painting), fantasy provides a third concept of the self that interfaces virtual and physical space, and so shatters Cartesian dualism and reforms the cogito (58–64). Yet it is important to note that the physical body’s role in Lacanian accounts results from its inadequate prematurity, which disrupts our relation to the world, drives the anticipation of self-control sought through the imaginary and signifying structures, and situates the ego in tension with the immediacy of sensation. Thus in this account there is a very limited notion of the role of embodiment and the physical and it is this that sets it up to be compatible with virtual versions. This is further evident from Lacan’s own interest in first wave cybernetics; Lacan does not claim that humans are machines, like Wiener, but in order to suggest their affinity Nusselder quotes Lacan’s question of whether humans are as human as all that (67). However there is also a significant distinction that might have been drawn between their accounts, since for Wiener humans are the mechanistic system, while Lacan instead presented language as the system, which ‘through its combinations already governs’ while processed humans are ‘thrown into it’ and get ‘caught up in its gears’ (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book 2, 306–7). For Lacan the human is not the processor but the processed.

Nusselder then compares second wave cybernetics’ emphasis on an observer’s positionality with its importance in Lacan’s account of the imaginary structure, before going on to suggest a ‘Lacanian third-wave cybernetics’. Žižek’s description of fantasy as the subjective-objective core of the sense of self, Nusselder suggests finds a spatial equivalent in cyberspace, which is a subjective-objective space that reveals how the unconscious is ‘out there’. In an attempt to break down the distinction between humans and computers, Nusselder also adopts arguments that suggest that emotions do not have a ‘real cause’ and posits that: ‘[f]or beings of communication and representation like us, emotions are not the real, substantial criteria’ (95). Nusselder connects this notion that we ‘imagine’ emotions to Lacan’s view that only anxiety is not an emotion and has a real cause (94). So physiological aspects are elided and the significance of the emotions is problematically reduced. This viewpoint in particular might have benefited from attempting to substantiate its assumptions and by engaging with recent literature that suggests the intertwined nature of the body, the emotions and rationality. In this respect it seems more in tune with AI attitudes contemporaneous with Lacan.

The closing argument more helpfully focuses on the ways in which Nusselder's Lacanian interpretation of human interactions via cyberspace is in tune with descriptions (by Žižek amongst others) of the decline of the prohibitive paternal social structures and the rise of capitalist imperatives of enjoyment and excess. There is neither purely utopic liberation or dystopic deficiency through the replacement of forms of traditional subjectivation by technological subjectivation. Both the computer screen and Lacanian accounts, Nusselder claims, instead help to make us aware of, and so hold our distance from, 'our unconscious involvement in the media society' and 'to gain insight into ways in which laws (organizing symbolic relations) are operational.' (136) Nusselder attempts to forge a middle way between modernist centripetal and postmodernist centrifugal constructions of subjectivity, by positing that subjectivity is understood best by realising that rather than an opposition between the bodily and the virtual subject of the representation they normally go together, with us 'in the middle, "in media"' (140). The computer screen allows a 'staging' of our fantasies at a protective distance as long as we guard against taking the construction for real, and this can also awaken us to the role of fantasy in reality (142).

Out of what in places can be a rather dense theoretical montage, there emerges a forceful interpretation of how Lacan's psychoanalytical theories may hold useful insights for contemporary discourses about cyberspace and digital technologies. The book would have benefited from Nusselder foregrounding his own argument more and from more clarity about where views labelled 'Lacanian' are perhaps Nusselder's own more than those of Lacan. It can prove confusing (albeit aptly) when one encounters statements such as a 'Lacanian point that I try to make' (80). Yet whether one concurs with Nusselder's inferences or not, this work makes a valuable contribution both to discourses on psychoanalysis and to discourses on digital technologies by examining why and how they might be brought into dialogue with each other.

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